

## The Battle of Onverwacht: 1899 - 1902

Over two centuries ago, in 1806, the domination of the Dutch Cape colony by the British Empire sparked resistance from the independence-minded Boers, the descendants of the original Dutch settlers of Southern Africa. With strong antagonism against the Anglicization of their country and Britain's anti-slavery policies, in 1833, the Boers concocted an exodus into African tribal territory, where they founded the republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State (History.com, 2010). The two new republics resided peacefully with their British neighbours until 1867, when the discovery of diamonds and gold in the region initiated their desperation for wealth, instigating the inevitable conflict between the Boer states and British Empire (History.com, 2010), which provoked the Boers to attack in order to forestall what they saw as an approaching British conquest. As a result, The South African War, also recognized as the Boer War, erupted in South Africa between the British Empire and the two Boer (Afrikaner) republics. This thrilling war began on October 11<sup>th</sup>, 1899 ending only on May 31<sup>st</sup>, 1902 with Britain's victory and the foundation of the Peace of Vereeniging (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2017). It remains to be the most abhorrent and destructive modern armed conflict in South Africa's history (Saho, 2017).

When war broke out, British forces (by mid-June 1900) had conquered most major Boer cities and formally annexed their territories, but the Boers launched guerilla warfare tactics that disgruntled the British occupiers (History.com, 2010). Boer commandos streamed across the borders into the British colonies of the Cape of Good Hope and Natal (RSL, NSW, 2014). As a strategy to provide sanctuary, the British government began a systematic search to call for support from across the Empire. As allies, Australian colonies were quick to offer their support. Although there is no agreed figure for the number of Australians who served, suggested figures estimate approximately 20,000 and 80 volunteered men and women respectively (National Archives of Australia, 2018).

Although military history has always been associated with the chronicle of Australia and its European inhabitants, the Boer War had been the first full commitment of troops by all the Australian Colonies to a foreign war. With the establishment of the Australian Commonwealth on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1901, it became our country's first military contribution as a Nation (RSL NSW, 2014). Australians served in contingents raised by the six colonies (the Australian Commonwealth) and fought in waves. First, there were the contingents raised by the Australian colonies due to the outbreak of war in 1899 (Australian War Memorial, n.d) but shortly after, the Boers inflicted three defeats on the British army during a period called 'Black Week'. This led to the imperial government and leading citizens around the empire requesting for more contingents of citizen soldiers. Most Australian colonial governments raised a second wave of contingents entirely composed of mounted riflemen who, like the Boers, rode horses for mobility but dismounted to battle (Australian Government, 2018). The third were the imperial bushmen contingents, the fourth were the draft contingents and finally, close to the end of the war, the Australian Commonwealth Horse contingents were raised (Australian War Memorial, n.d). These contingents fought in both the British counter-offensive of 1900, which resulted in the capture of the Boer capitals, and in the long, weary guerrilla phases of the war. These troops were highly valued for their ability to shoot and ride, and in many ways performed well in the open war on the veld. However, until now, the effects on these Australian soldiers have been secreted in the wake of their gallantry and accomplishments in war.

Australia's contribution was significant, although volunteer contingents generally arrived without having experienced abundant training and were sent on campaign immediately, serving on the veld ranged from relentless heat during the day to freezing cold at night (Australian War Memorial, n.d).

British commanders became increasingly reliant on these troops due to the Boers forming groups of highly mobile commandos which harassed their troop movements and lines of supply. Also, conditions for both soldiers and horses were harsh. In the early stages of the war, Australian soldier losses were so high through illness that components of the first and second contingents ceased to exist as viable units after a few months of service. In the second phase of the war, when the British forces captured the major South African towns, over-extended supply lines and scarce food caused problems. Disease and epidemics also took a heavy toll as water contaminated by corpses and human waste infected the army during a period of rest. 1,000 deaths followed, mostly from typhoid (Australian War Memorial, n.d). In the duration of the Boer War, Australian soldiers suffered casualty numbers which only have been exceeded by those of the First and Second World Wars. 2,300 men were killed or wounded by the Boers in three separate engagements whilst on service during this war (Australian War Memorial, n.d). These Australians in South Africa, comprising of initiative, pride, selflessness and courage, are seen to be the first men to exhibit this character. Seeing these soldiers as volunteers has encouraged us to move beyond our usual focus on British praise for Australian skill as scouts and horsemen and to examine their performance more critically. (The Boer War: Army, Nation and Empire, n.d). Over a century ago, our men in uniform were more partners in the empire than victims of it.

Today, when we look back on the South African war, we peer across a period of complete war and political and social transformation. As time has progressed, this war to bring two republics under British rule has advanced our evolution toward nationhood. We would like to thank the soldiers who shivered and starved through the Boer War; we remember and honour you. Although we have awarded medals to many Soldiers and added their names to monuments in honour for their bravery, no number of medals or ribbons can ever replenish the hole left behind by a fallen service member. This year (2018) marks 116 years since the hostilities had ended in South Africa but still, the war lives on in the periphery of the collective Australian memory as an early tableau in the dramas of our military achievement and nation growth. We will forever continue to remember, honour and pay gratitude to those who have served our country.

## References

Australian Government. (2018). *The Boer War: Australians and the War in South Africa, 1899 – 1902*. Retrieved from <http://guides.naa.gov.au/boer-war/introduction.aspx>

Australian War Memorial. (n.d). *Australia and the boer War, 1899 - 1902*. Retrieved from <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/atwar/boer>

Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2017). *South African War: British-South African History*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/event/South-African-War>

History.com. (2010). *Boer War Begins in South Africa*. Retrieved from <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/boer-war-begins-in-south-africa>

National Archives of Australia. (2018). *Boer War Records - Fact Sheet 67*. Retrieved from <http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/fact-sheets/fs67.aspx>

RSL NSW. (2014). *Boer War*. Retrieved from <http://rslnsw.org.au/commemoration/heritage/the-boer-war>

Saho. (2017). *Second Anglo-Boer War*. Retrieved from <http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/second-anglo-boer-war-1899-1902>

The Boer War: Army, Nation and Empire. (n.d). Retrieved from [https://www.army.gov.au/sites/g/files/net1846/f/1999\\_boer\\_war\\_army\\_nation\\_and\\_empire\\_0.pdf](https://www.army.gov.au/sites/g/files/net1846/f/1999_boer_war_army_nation_and_empire_0.pdf)